



Parashat Ekev
Bind These Words

by Ari Lev Fornari on Friday August 11, 2006
17 Av 5766
Deuteronomy 7:12 - 11:25, Shabbat, 17 Av 5766

Chest Binder : an undergarment worn by female-to-male (FTM) transsexual, transgender and genderqueer people, and anyone else who chooses to flatten the appearance of their breasts.

Talit Katan: an undergarment traditionally worn by Jewish men which has knotted fringes tied to its four corners to be a reminder of the 613 mitzvot found in the Torah.

“Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead.” —Deuteronomy 11:18

“*B’shem mitzvat tzitzit v’mitzvat hityatzrut*” (“For the sake of the mitzvah of ritual fringes and the mitzvah of self-formation.”) —Rabbi Eli Kukla, Director of Education, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice

I say this *bracha* (blessing) quietly to myself, as I bind these words, as I tighten the Velcro fabric that presses my breast flat. Let them be a sign: that I am not a woman, I think, that I am maybe a man, I hope, that I am holy Jewish and genderqueer, I know.

This week, in Parashat Ekev, we read the second paragraph of the Shema prayer. I hold these words close in my prayers as I tie my *tzitzit* (ritual fringes) the edges of my chest binder.

Instructions: There are sixteen strands in a pack – four long ones and twelve short ones. Separate these into four groups with one long one and three short ones in each. The longer one is called the shamash and is the one used for the winding.

There are four knotted strings that hang from the corners of my chest binder. “*Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them throughout their generations fringes in the corners of their garments.*” (Numbers 15:38) It has been one year since I started wearing clothing that compresses my chest and asking people to use both male and female pronouns.



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Sometimes this feels empowering and exciting, but a lot of times the thick, sweaty fabric is just uncomfortable, making it difficult to breath and making my sternum ache.

Even out the four strands at one end and push the group through one of the corner holes in the talit. Even up seven of the eight strands (the four being doubled) and leave the extra length of the shammash hanging to one side.

It is not always easy to learn Jewish rituals traditionally reserved for biological boys. Non-orthodox Jews, especially women, FTM's, and gender variant folks, need to consciously access information on how to *halakhically* [legally] observe the 613 *mitzvot*. But even then, they sometimes need to be made applicable. Wearing a *talit katan* chest binder is somewhere between observing and reclaiming. I want to fulfill the commandment, in light of and in spite of my attempt to simultaneously subvert gender norms and transgress gender boundaries. I bind the words of Torah close to my heart, bringing the intention of the Shema into my daily life, making my gender a sign “*when I stay at home and when I am away, when I lie down and when I get up.*” (Deuteronomy 11:19)

With the four strands in one hand and the other four in the other hand, make a double knot near the edge of the material. Take the shammash and wind it around the other seven strands in a spiral – seven turns. Be sure you end the winding where you began – otherwise you may end up with 7 1/2 or 6 1/2 winds. Make another double knot at this point (four over four).

I am not always sure I know how to pray. By which I mean, I don't always know how to connect the motions with my intentions, the Hebrew with my thoughts, the English with my traditions.

Spiral the shammash eight times around. Double knot. Spiral the shammash eleven times around. Double knot. Spiral the shammash thirteen times around. Final double knot.

Recently, I have been trying to enter Jewish traditions from a place of textual knowledge. Learning what they are about and then figuring out how I can connect with their intention in my own life. The *talit katan* chest binder empowers me to be active in the formation of my gender, my Judaism, my connection to the divine. Carrying the intentions with me, feeling them on my body, holding them in my heart, this I can do.

“And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them? and be holy unto your God.” (Numbers 15:39)



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